Translation of the six-page scholarly notes (“Erläuterungen”)

Literal scholarly translation; historical register retained without embellishment.

As for Cardanus’s fame, it rested not only upon the astonishing versatility with which he united mathematical, medical, astrological, religious, political, and other knowledge and ideas, but no less upon his almost demonic-seeming individuality, which he made the object of his own investigation in his autobiography (De vita propria).

In his view of the world Cardan was a “Hylozoist,” that is, he believed in the universal animation of all things, into which he incorporated his extensive knowledge in such a fashion that Pierre Bayle, in the Cardanus article of his great Dictionnaire historique et critique, was obliged to have recourse to Seneca’s dictum: “Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae” (“No great genius without a mixture of madness”), to which Lessing also alludes.

Bayle’s Dictionnaire, with its articles on individual personalities, also became Lessing’s model for his “Rescues.” As concerns the Rescue of Cardan, Lessing himself described it as “a good supplement to the article which Bayle made in his critical dictionary concerning this scholar,” and individual thoughts are indeed taken from it almost word for word.

Lessing, however, had in some respects already been preceded by his Leipzig teacher, the archaeologist Johann Friedrich Christ, who likewise undertook “Rescues” after the Baylean model and, among other things, published a German treatise on Cardan which relieved him of the accusation of being a liar, deceiver, lecher, and son of a whore.

Now Lessing, stimulated by the Wittenberg librarian Schwarz, who made Cardan’s work De subtilitate (“On Subtlety”) available to him in the first edition, from Melanchthon’s former possession, seized the opportunity to rescue Cardan also from the ill repute of “godlessness” into which the criticism of the philologist Julius Caesar Scaliger (d. 1558) had brought him through his comparison of religions in the eleventh book of De subtilitate.

Lessing’s preference for Cardan did not leave him even after the publication of his Rescue (1754). In G. E. Lessing’s Leben (vol. I, p. 162), Karl Lessing reports that his brother had intended to publish the writings of Campanella, Cardan, and Giordano Bruno together. He wished “to extract the most remarkable passages and make his remarks upon them.” In the “Kollektaneen” which Lessing compiled (about 1769), there are likewise various excerpts from Cardan’s works, as well as a longer note, later (1775) reworked into the form of a letter, concerning the “Prophecy of Cardan,” “that around 1800 a very great change would take place in the Christian religion.”

PAGE 2 — TRANSMISSION

First printing in: Schrifften, Third Part, 1754, pp. 89–144. Reprinted, with consideration of a number of insignificant textual alterations by Lessing, in the Sämmtlichen Schriften, Part 3, 1784.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

p. 247 — “the greatest understanding combined with the greatest folly”: Allusion to the Senecan quotation already cited by Pierre Bayle, “Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae” (“No great genius without madness”).

De vita propria: Cardan’s autobiography is to be found in a German translation by Hermann Hefele, Jena, 1914.

“Suspicion of atheism”: In Lessing’s time “atheism” (godlessness) meant not only the absolute denial of a divine being altogether, but already the denial of its personal existence outside the world, as expressed, for example, in Spinoza’s pantheism or in the “Atheism Controversy” with Fichte.

“to cast the nativity”: Cardan had occupied himself extensively with astrology and attempted to explain the destiny of Christ from the position of the stars at his birth.

“Währmann”: guarantor; authority or witness relied upon.

“(Disput. Magic. Tom. I, lib. II)”: The correct title of Martin Del Rio’s work is Disquisitionum magicarum libri VI (“Six Books of Investigations concerning Magic”); it appeared in 1593. Lessing cites volume I, book 2.

De astrorum iudiciis: The exact title of Cardan’s work is In Cl. Ptolemaei de astrorum iudiciis libros commentarii (“Commentaries on the Books of Claudius Ptolemy concerning Judgments from the Stars”); year of publication 1554.

“(Hist. Crit. Phil. Tomi IV, Parte altera, p. 76)”: This refers to the Historia critica philosophiae (“Critical History of Philosophy”) in five volumes (1742–44). Lessing cites volume IV, part 2, p. 76. Brucker’s work was the first complete history of philosophy in the modern period and is frequently used by Lessing.

p. 248 — “Bayle in his critical dictionary”: This refers to Pierre Bayle’s influential Dictionnaire historique et critique (“Historical and Critical Dictionary”), from whose article on Cardanus Lessing proceeds. Lessing also owes Bayle’s work numerous other historical-critical impulses, just as the literary form of Lessing’s “Rescues” recalls the method practiced there.

“in his catalogue of rare books”: This refers to the Catalogus historico-criticus librorum rariorum (“Historical-Critical Catalogue of Rare Books”) of 1732.

“in the 4th part of the Menagiana”: This concerns the four-volume collection Menagiana ou les bons mots et remarques critiques, historiques, morales et d’érudition de M. Ménage, ed. par ses amis (“Menagiana, or the witty sayings and critical, historical, moral, and learned remarks of M. Ménage, edited by his friends”). The work appeared one year after Ménage’s death; the second expanded edition appeared in 1715. It was a collection of materials of various kinds, interwoven with much wit and anecdote.

PAGE 3 — EXPLANATORY NOTES

p. 248 — “the four principal religions”: Paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

“Exercit. 258 n. r”: The title of Scaliger’s work is Exotericarum exercitationum liber quintus decimus de subtilitate ad Hieronymum Cardanum (“Fifteenth Book of Exoteric Exercises on Subtlety, addressed to Hieronymus Cardanus”); published 1557.

“Interpretation of the First Book of Moses”: This refers to the Quaestiones in Genesim (“Investigations concerning Genesis, i.e. the First Book of Moses”) of 1623.

p. 249 — “Of the Three Impostors”: As early as 1239 Pope Gregory IX asserted of the Emperor Frederick II that he had described Moses, Christ, and Mohammed as the three great impostors of world history. Since the seventeenth century there circulated a separate anonymous work De tribus impostoribus (“Of the Three Impostors”) on the same subject, which purportedly had already appeared in 1598 and concerning whose author various conjectures were made. (In German, 2nd ed. by E. Weller, 1876.) Here the supernatural dogmas of the positive religions are sharply criticized from a rational-humanistic standpoint.

“(Polyh. T. I, lib. I, c. 8 § 6)”: i.e. Polyhistor, volume I, book 1, chapter 8, § 6. This refers to Morhof’s Polyhistor (“The Polymath”), published 1688; Lessing cites volume I, book 1, chapter 8, § 6.

“(Hist. univers. Atheismi et Atheorum p. 365 et 547)”: The title of the work is Historia universalis Atheismi et Atheorum (“Universal History of Godlessness and the Godless”); year of publication 1725. Lessing cites pp. 365 and 547.

“Observat. selectarum (Tom. X, p. 219)”: This refers to the Observationes selectae Halenses ad rem literariam spectantes (“Selected Halle Observations concerning Literary Matters”), volume 10, p. 219.

“(Analect. litteraria p. 210)”: The full title is Analecta litteraria de libris rarioribus (“Literary Selections concerning Rarer Books”); published 1750; p. 210.

“Library of Salthenius”: This refers to the Bibliotheca librorum rariorum (“Library of Rare Books”) of the Swede Salthen, from 1751. Lessing cites p. 272.

“Samaritanorum Pentateuchum”: The title of the work is Exercitationes historico-criticae in utrumque Samaritanorum Pentateuchum (“Historical-Critical Studies of the Two Samaritan Pentateuchs”). The Samaritan Pentateuch is the vernacular continuation of the five Books of Moses (Pentateuch), which, after the religious separation of Samaria from Judea (about the fourth century B.C.), retained binding validity in Samaria alone.

“belonged to Melanchthon”: Schwarz was librarian in Wittenberg, where Lessing was engaged in his Cardanus studies in 1752. Small notes are marginal notes.

p. 250 — “bookseller’s panegyric”: Panegyricus (Greek: eulogy) is here the bookseller’s praise of the work which he has taken into his publishing house.

“Format is folio”: i.e. large format (21 by 33 cm).

“of the Mahomet”: of Mohammed, i.e. the Mohammedans.

PAGE 4 — EXPLANATORY NOTES

p. 251 — “Hercules … Ceres”: Greek-Roman gods and demigods.

“These, however, reproach them”: The following arguments against paganism derive from ancient Church apologetics.

p. 252 — “Son of the widow”: Cf. John 11:1 ff.; Mark 5:22 ff. and parallels; Luke 7:11 ff.

p. 253 — “and the tower in Paradise”: This probably refers to the Koran, Sura 39: “But those who fear God shall find in Paradise chambers magnificently built one above another, beneath which rivers of water flow.”

p. 254 — “Engastrimuthi”: from the Greek engastrimythos, ventriloquist.

“certain Orgia”: Orgies in antiquity were the ecstatic Bacchic festivals. Here the ecstatic Mohammedan exercises are evidently meant, passing over into rapture.

“Even their saints”: The following distorted saint-names cannot be traced to any source.

p. 255 — “men in the fiery furnace”: Cf. the Old Testament apocryphon of the same name concerning the Book of Daniel.

“some periods”: i.e. some Latin sentences.

p. 256 — “but also to praise”: With this, Lessing anticipates the programme of comparative religious scholarship. The unchurchliness of this method lies not so much in comparison of religions as such, as in the impartial standpoint from which Christianity is compared with its rivals.

p. 257 — “confirmed by witnesses”: Cf. the quotation from Origenes (Against Celsus I, 2) in the note to p. 307 (“On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power”).

“Pöbel”: from the Latin populus; a disparaging designation for “the people.”

“Propagation of the Christian religion”: Only through the Enlightenment was the ancient ecclesiastical-orthodox conception overcome that the spread of Christianity throughout the whole world was supernaturally directed already in the time of the Apostles (cf. Acts 1:8; Romans 10:18). That Lessing stood wholly upon the ground of a natural explanation is proved by his unfinished sketch, written after 1760, “On the Manner and Means of the Propagation and Spread of the Christian Religion,” conceived as a preliminary draft for a larger work on church history.

“still more ignorant”: In the “Notes on Livy’s Account of the Extirpation of the Bacchanals in Rome,” appended to the “Propagation and Spread,” Lessing expressed this important insight still more clearly. “To found a new sect,” it says there, “to preach a new religion, an unlearned man is

always more skilful than a learned man … Truth and philosophy will get him nowhere with the mob … he must cease to be philosopher and orator; he must become, or make it appear that he is, sacrificulus et vates (priest and prophet)."

"naturally unconquerable": On this point too Lessing advances a more rational view in the fragment on "Propagation and Spread," clearly and correctly emphasizing that the governmental countermeasures against Christianity in the first centuries were much weaker and less coherent than ecclesiastical historiography has represented them.

PAGE 5 — EXPLANATORY NOTES

p. 257 — "torn apart by internal sects": Above all the Christian freethinkers of the first centuries (Gnostics and others) are meant. In the fragment on "Propagation and Spread," Lessing chiefly emphasized the Church's "tolerance" toward "all kinds of heretics" and showed how these movements were ultimately destined to be absorbed into the Great Church and thereby to strengthen it.

"rather fools and madmen": The Church's exaltation and overestimation of the Christian martyrs goes back to the time of the ancient Church; cf., for example, Tertullian of Carthage (about 200): "The blood of the martyrs is a seed!" (Apologeticum, chapter 50). The critical standpoint on the question of martyrdom is likewise taken up again in the fragment on "Propagation and Spread." In another fragment by Lessing, "On the Elpisticians," produced at approximately the same time, there is talk of the "many false martyrs" of ancient times, who are simply placed on the same level as "suicides." The Gnostics of the ancient Church had already expressed the same criticism in principle (see previous note).

p. 258 — "to force under the yoke of faith": How far Lessing in fact stood from this thought is proved by his later writing "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power."

"cannot come alone": This too does not express Lessing's actual opinion; cf. The Education of the Human Race, §§ 4 and 77 (with note).

p. 260 — "refuted with still worse": Lessing therefore does not regard the superiority of Christianity over the other religions as unequivocal; cf. the parable of the ring in Nathan the Wise.

"Babylonian Captivity": see below, under p. 548, "The Education of the Human Race."

"spare his life": Job 2:6. In what follows also, the Jew portrays the fate of Israel by the symbol of the person of Job.

"limits of your raging": allusion to Psalm 2:1 and Job 38:11.

p. 261 — "Bildad and Zophar": Two of Job's three friends (cf. 2:11), who seek to convince him of his wrong against God.

"of your piety": Thus Job's friends say to him (2:9). The following "bless" (as in 1:5) in the Hebrew text is perhaps a correction for "curse."

“come down in a storm”: cf. Job 38:1 (40:6); beginning of God’s speech to Job. What follows is combined from Deuteronomy 30:3 and Job 42:10.

“Polemici”: Greek-Latin; controversial theologians.

“Reland and Sale”: The works meant are De religione Mohammedanica libri duo (“Two Books on the Mohammedan Religion”) by Adrian Reland (1715), and The Koran … translated into English by George Sale (1734).

“a Mussulman”: German rendering of the Arabic word Muslim. “Islam” means “submission.” The “Muslim” is he who submits himself (to God).

p. 262 — “keys of heaven and hell”: cf. Matthew 16:19 and Revelation 1:18.

“blessed without justice”: allusion to Romans 3:28.

“one God … future punishment and reward”: These are the two principal points of Mohammed’s preaching.

PAGE 6 — EXPLANATORY NOTES

p. 263 — “I am his prophet”: The Mohammedan faith admits beside God no second divine being, but only the prophet. Among the numerous prophets recognized by Islam, from Adam to Mohammed, Christ is also found.

“Allegories”: riddling speeches.

p. 264 — “we know you”: The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as is well known, teaches the unity of God while at the same time maintaining the threefoldness of Father, Son, and Spirit.

“your Koran”: The Bible is meant.

“your heavenly Jerusalem”: Revelation 21 and 22 are meant.

p. 266 — “no other edition at hand”: This late edition of 1664 is therefore to be distinguished from the first edition, from Melanchthon’s possession, which Lessing was given access to by Schwarz in Wittenberg and from which he proceeds in his investigation.

“in Calumniatorem”: directed against Scaliger’s Exercitationes.

p. 267 — “by his soul”: Probably passages such as Genesis 22:16; 26:3; Isaiah 45:23; 62:38; Amos 4:2; Hebrews 6:13 are meant, where God swears “by Himself” or by His “holiness.” The Bible speaks of God’s “ascending and descending” only “innumerable times” if passages concerning Christ are included as well. For the Old Testament cf. Exodus 19:11 and Psalm 18:10.

p. 269 — “Literatores”: Latin; philologists, scholars of language.